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STAGE AND PLAYERS IN EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY AMERICA

The popular impression of the early American colonists is that they were solemn, straight-laced intolerants, whose strenuous life of pioneering and piety left little time and less inclination for profane relaxations. If such were a true impression, the American theatre would have been forced to postpone its birth until well after the Revolution; but the fact that play-acting was practiced in various colonies south of New England almost from the beginning of the eighteenth century is evidence that our forbears were human persons with an entire willingness to be amused and diverted, even by an institution which their puritanic brethren assured them was an agency of the Evil One. True it is that these puritans made relentless warfare against the stage until the end of the century. But such antagonism may have done as much good as harm, since it tended to rally the pleasure-seekers more staunchly to the support of the theatre.

Some semblance of professional acting was offered in America as early as 1703 by an English soldier of fortune, and during the first half of the century several sporadic attempts were made. Of the methods and equipment employed we know almost nothing. But we learn that there was sometimes trouble with badly memorized parts. The questionable quality of the acting is further suggested by the fact that the best known of these early companies in 1751 advertised a benefit for an actor who had just got out of prison, and another for an actress to enable her to buy off her time, she no doubt being a poor immigrant who had sold herself for a limited period, as the custom was, to meet the expense of the voyage.¹ From such evidence we may conclude that the early Thespians were adventurers rather than trained artists.

But 1752 marks the inauguration of more dignified drama in America. In that year William Hallam, a bankrupt London manager, sent a band of a dozen players under the charge of his brother Lewis to these shores in an effort to retrieve

¹ G. O. Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre*, Philadelphia, 1888, Vol. I, p. 10. J. N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage*, New York, 1866, Vol. I, p. 8.

his fortunes. With their first performance on September 15, 1752, at Williamsburg, Virginia, the continuous history of the American theatre begins.

The company brought with it, according to Charles Durang's *History of the Philadelphia Stage*,² the theatrical property from Hallam's London theatre, which included a good wardrobe. But the costumes were in the main contemporary, and the scenery, while better than it would otherwise have been, was very meagre judged by present standards, the same set doing duty for various plays. That the equipment was slight is apparent from the fact that nine years later the scenery and costumes of the company were valued at only \$1,000.³

At first the function of the orchestra was entrusted to a lone harpsichord. Before long this department had grown to perhaps a half dozen musicians, but probably some of these were "gentlemen performers," who contributed their services for pleasure.⁴

Obviously the drawing power of the theatre depended almost wholly upon the actors. A detailed description of their manner of acting would be interesting in the extreme, but the records are not illuminating on that point. Dunlap, the first chronicler of our theatre, merely says that the company was "good and efficient."⁵ If it was otherwise, it was not for lack of great models on the English stage. Quin, a powerful representative of the old, ponderous, declamatory school, had just left the boards, while the rising genius was Garrick, the founder of a new school of natural acting, which numbered also Barry and Peg Woffington among its distinguished exponents. To which school the Hallam troupe belonged, it would be difficult to say with certainty, but we may assume that they followed the older tradition, for a prominent member was described as a heavy speaker of much propriety, and the youngest of the group developed into an actor of the declamatory type.⁶

² Chapter I. This work appeared serially in *The Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* between 1854 and 1860.

³ Ireland, Vol. I, p. 32.

⁴ O. G. Sonneck, *Early Opera in America*, 1915, p. 23.

⁵ William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, New York, 1832, p. 4.

⁶ Durang, Chapter II.

The conditions under which this pioneer band worked must have been often a sad handicap to the effective interpretation of Shakespeare and Farquhar and Addison. In their itinerary during the first few years, they found not over three or four theatres built expressly for dramatic purposes, and these were small, ill-equipped, and of course dimly lighted. In less fortunate towns the players utilized an empty store, an upper room, or perhaps the court-house, sometimes dispensing with scenery altogether.⁷ Owing to the smallness of the company, one actor was occasionally compelled to take two parts in the same play. Furthermore the scanty numbers frequently made appropriate casting impossible; Mrs. Hallam once played Juliet to her son Lewis's Romeo.⁸

Nor were their handicaps entirely those of equipment. The audience itself was wont to make playing a hardship. The beaux insisted on the ancient privilege, exercised since Elizabethan days by their honorable confraternity, of sitting on the stage. Behind the scenes these gentlemen mingled freely with the performers, and no doubt even on the stage ogled the actresses shamelessly. Indeed, according to one chronicler, an actress, having finished a speech, did not hesitate to chat with a gallant until her next cue.⁹ The opposite portion of the audience, the gallery gods, likewise were given to thrusting themselves unpleasantly upon the notice of the players by the immemorial practice of throwing eggs.¹⁰

When one considers that, in addition to such annoyances, the actors were regarded as moral pariahs in nearly all communities, and had the legal status of vagrants, one can realize that any efforts they made at worthy acting must have been prompted by love of the art.

Some notion of the scenery and stage effects employed before the Revolution may be gained from three American plays composed in this period. *The Prince of Parthia*, written in 1759 by Thomas Godfrey, and acted eight years later, contains a few brief scene descriptions, such as "The Palace" or "A Prison," and the ensuing dialogue and action have but

⁷ Seilhamer, Vol. I, p. 124.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 137 and Ireland, Vol. I, p. 37.

⁹ John Esten Cooke, *The Virginia Comedians*, Chapter X.

¹⁰ Seilhamer, Vol. I, p. 135.

little to do with the location. From this one gathers that the sets were simple, consisting chiefly of a back scene suggesting a palace or what not, and equally usable in any other play requiring a similar background. The stage, it appears, was allied to the Elizabethan in that it was regarded as a platform, only vaguely localized, from which the characters could speak.

The Conquest of Canada by George Cockings, printed in 1766 and acted in 1773, contains a scene (Act III, Scene 2) which reveals the poverty of the colonial theatre in the matter of mechanics. The nocturnal expedition of the French fire-ships against the British fleet is to be depicted. The stage is darkened; a ship appears—no doubt on rollers. Men with speaking trumpets behind the scenes roar orders and bawl incoherently, while others on the boat run fore and aft, making a great clatter of oars. Twice a light appears, to indicate the approach of fire-ships, which, we are informed by the shouters, are successfully staved off. A direction in the middle of Scene 2 of Act IV further illustrates this point of simple stage effects. The curtain falls, and for some moments the discharge of artillery and other sounds of battle are heard. Then the curtain rises upon the dead and wounded, and thus is obviated the necessity of enacting the conflict.

At the end of the dark scene just mentioned, there is a significant direction: "Scene closes; Lights descend." The problem of producing dim-stage effects when candles were the sole means of illumination was met in various ways; but here we have what looks to be a simple solution of the difficulty. If the present writer interprets this hint aright, the mode of operation in this instance was as follows: In preparation for the dark scene, the overhead lights, consisting of hoops of candles were raised by some device into the upper region above the stage; then when the scene ended the lights were lowered to their proper place. Whether our early theatres were equipped with footlights is a matter of doubt. The above direction ignores them, and in fact some authorities maintain that they were not introduced on the English stage until about 1765. If there were footlights at this time, they were probably operated by the apparatus which we know to have been in use toward the end of the century, when the lamps were placed in a long tin trough capable of being lowered beneath the level of the

stage by means of counterweights.¹¹ With the whole auditorium lighted (albeit dimly) by candles, which obviously could not be extinguished until the audience had departed, a completely dark stage would be impossible, but the devices above described would be sufficient to produce a creditable gloom that might be considered to represent darkness.

Another bit of evidence as to stage mechanics is found in *The Conquest of Canada* at the end of Scene I of Act V. The French are retreating. "As they run across the stage, scene draws and discovers a larger view of the Heights of Abraham," on which spot the action is continued. The same artifice is employed in *The Disappointment; or, the Force of Credulity*, an indecorous comedy written in 1767 by "Andrew Barton" (Col. Thomas Forrest?). The play, to be sure, was never acted, but it was put in rehearsal only to be withdrawn four days before its performance, owing to personal allusions which it contained. In the middle of Act II, Scene 4, the location being "A Room in Moll Placket's House," an amorous couple propose retiring to the bed-chamber; whereupon we encounter this direction: "As they walk towards the upper part of the stage, a scene opens, and discovers a bed, table, and two bottles on it, with a broken glass over one, and a candle stuck in the other." Both these directions suggest that a sort of outer and inner stage division was observed at times. During the first part of the scene a pair of flats, representing in one case the French camp and in the other the wall of a room, shut off the rear of the stage; at the proper moment the flats were drawn apart, disclosing the appropriate setting for the remainder of the scene. All of which, if our conjecture be correct, is strikingly reminiscent of Elizabethan technique.

During the last few years of the colonial period, the American company, as it was now called, stood on a plane considerably superior to that of the original band. The leading actor was Lewis Hallam the Younger, described by a contemporary as a pleasing performer, remarkable for his ease. He was competent in both tragedy and comedy, though in the latter his declamation was mouthing and rant. But he excelled in comedy, and while his manner was formal and prim like his

¹¹ W. J. Lawrence, "Early American Playgoing," *The Theatre*, December, 1916.

costumes, he surpassed all competitors in numerous rôles as long as he remained on the stage, and gave the fullest satisfaction to his audiences.¹² The second man in the company was John Henry, who joined the ranks in 1767. He was uncommonly handsome and developed into a player who was hardly outdone until the last decade of the century. Mrs. Douglass (formerly Mrs. Hallam) was the leading actress. She was a woman of striking beauty and elegance, who is said to have been esteemed in England before coming to these shores.¹³ Ann Storer was a young and beautiful player, talented in singing as well as acting. She did both comedy and tragedy with spirit and propriety, and was a great favorite with the public. The company as a whole possessed much animation and glee.

In the matter of equipment there had been some advance. What was described as a most excellent set of scenes, done by the principal scene-painter of Covent Garden, was purchased, and special scenery was occasionally obtained and advertised as an attraction. The dresses were pronounced elegant, but of course little attempt was yet made at historical accuracy.¹⁴

When the break with England became imminent, Congress recommended that horse-racing, gaming, cock-fighting and play-acting be discouraged. Accordingly the American Company departed for the West Indies to await more peaceful times. The hiatus was partially filled by the English soldiers, who established military theatres in Boston, Philadelphia and New York during the period of their occupation. At Boston, Burgoyne was master of the revels. At Philadelphia, John André was scene-painter. In this department he did meritorious work, but his acting was indifferent. At New York the soldiers improved at least one branch, the orchestra, which they expanded to fourteen instruments. In general their scenery was reported to be wretched and their costumes sumptuous.¹⁵

The latter point is borne out by an examination of the receipt book of the New York "Theatre Royal",¹⁶ in which

¹² Seilhamer, Vol. I, pp. 202-3n.; Durang, Chapter XII.

¹³ Durang, Chapter II.

¹⁴ Sonneck, p. 33; Seilhamer, Vol. I, p. 279n.

¹⁵ Dunlap, p. 54.

¹⁶ To be found in the library of the New York Historical Society.

such items as the following appear: "Recd . . . nine pounds in full for Sundry Millinery for Cupids dress for the Theatre." (Apparently the Cupid of the colonies was a heavier dresser than the Cupid of the classics.) "Recd . . . nine pound fifteen shillings 3d/ in full account for Ribbands, Gloves, &c. for the Theatre." "Recd . . . thirty seven pounds six shillings 8d/ on account for Wigs &c., and attendance on the Theatre." Two weeks later nearly seventeen pounds more was paid out for "Wigs &c." Four pounds was expended for ten masks; a pair of earrings cost one pound, seventeen shillings, four pence; a feather came to the same figure; and every two or three weeks sums ranging from nine to twenty-nine pounds were paid for dresses.

Generally the female parts in these exhibitions were taken by men, but in New York at least, women frequently assisted, the queen of the footlights being the mistress of one of the officers.

Even before peace was declared the sock and buskin were donned by an upstart company, partly professional and partly amateur, which began operations in Baltimore. Probably their standard of acting was not high; nor did the audiences always lend serious encouragement to the performers, judging from a prologue of the period which comments on the habits prevalent among the "bucks" of drinking, tossing oranges and talking noisily.¹⁷

When the Old American Company returned from the West Indies, it was opposed on moral and patriotic grounds; however an opening was finally effected about 1785. The company was not large, but it had some able players, to whose ranks the leading recruit was Thomas Wignell, a comedian from England. His humor was luxuriant, but it was that of a comedy-actor and not of a buffoon. He was praised by the critics for confining himself to the lines of the dramatist; for in those days the comedians were prone to overlook Hamlet's injunction: "And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them."

The managers, it appears, found it wise to encourage rising talent outside the theatre, because in this way an actor might be procured at more moderate terms than if he were hired from

¹⁷ Seilhamer, Vol. II, p. 61.

England. Occasionally we encounter an announcement to the effect that George Barnwell or perhaps Desdemona will be played by a young gentleman or a young lady of the city, this being the performer's first appearance on any stage. It would be difficult to imagine Mr. Belasco advertising that the leading rôle in one of his current plays would be taken for a few nights by a green amateur, but such an arrangement was once considered no detriment to the receipts.

The scarcity of actors is further attested by the appearance now and then of the Old American Company's tailor as a player of small parts. Still better evidence is the necessity one of the minor strolling companies was under of casting women in male rôles. We read that Mrs. Bradshaw represented Sir Walter Raleigh in *The Earl of Essex*, that Miss Kenna played Carlos in *Isabella*, and that Mrs. Kenna impersonated Patrick in *The Poor Soldier*.¹⁸

But in spite of insufficient resources and of moral opposition, the theatre prospered so that the managers ere long felt justified in augmenting their forces with experienced players from England. In 1792 Wignell withdrew from the Old American Company to form an independent organization at Philadelphia, made up largely of new actors from across the Atlantic—and a complete and able body they seem to have been. This rivalry forced Hallam and Henry to bestir themselves to the extent of bringing over eight Britishers, chief among whom were John Hodgkinson and his wife.

Hodgkinson was strongly built and in his make-up appeared handsome; he possessed unbounded animal spirits and an astonishing memory. Equally capable in comic, tragic and singing parts, he soon became the favorite of the public and was chiefly relied on to fill the house. His admirers dubbed him "the provincial Garrick" and "the American Kemble," all agreeing that he surpassed anyone yet seen in this country. Durang sings his praises in these superlatives: "It is conceded, by all faithful accounts of this great stage genius, that he combined more versatility of first rate power than ever fell to any mortal of the profession. . . . The history of the stage does not offer to our contemplation (not excepting Garrick) so

¹⁸ Durang, Chapters XII and XVI; Seilhamer, Vol. II, p. 310.

various a histrion, endowed with so much equal excellence, as Hodgkinson."¹⁹ But he had his detractors, who probably told the truth when they declared that his tragic style was ranting and turgid, and that he was expert at tearing a passion to tatters; Washington Irving, in his *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.* (1802), ingeniously satirized his breast-slapping, his grinning, his blinking, his skipping, jumping and general showiness, faults which no doubt arose from the exuberance of his temperament.

Hodgkinson's great popularity naturally gained him several disciples among his co-workers, with the result that the prevailing style of acting at this time, at least in the New York theatre, was more or less theatrical and unrestrained.

Mrs. Hodgkinson was almost as valuable as her husband. Though opera was her forte, she was excellent in brisk comedy as well as in tragedy. "In Ophelia," says Dunlap (page 100), "she was touching in a powerful degree, as her singing gave her advantages in this character which tragic actresses do not usually possess." She was capable of adapting herself admirably to any rôle she took, from the dignity of tragic heroines to the archness and girlish simplicity of juvenile parts. In a rôle of sharp contrasts, however, she experienced difficulty in shifting her key to meet sudden changes of emotion.²⁰

The most famous name on the roster of American actors during the last years of the eighteenth century is that of Joseph Jefferson, who came to these shores as a very young man about 1796. He was no doubt the most gifted and artistic comedy-actor of his generation. His mobile face was capable of exciting mirth by the power of feature alone.

In 1796 two other players of genuine merit established themselves here. One was Mrs. Robert Merry, said to be the most perfect artist yet seen in our theatre. Though without great pretensions to beauty, she possessed a highly expressive countenance, fine clear articulation and a sweetness of voice that charmed her hearers. Her manner was entirely devoid of rant, and she read with complete ease and freedom as well as critical correctness. Ireland (Vol. I, p. 155) as late as 1866 asserted that with the exception of Mrs. Duff and Fanny

¹⁹ *History of the Philadelphia Stage*, Chapter XVII.

²⁰ *Commercial Advertiser*, New York, Jan. 29, 1800.

Kemble every tragic actress America had yet beheld would suffer in comparison with Mrs. Merry.

The second actor was Thomas A. Cooper. His handsome face, noble person, fine mellow voice, the unusual dignity of his manner and grace of his action, and his eloquent declamation made him for thirty years one of the paramount favorites of the public. In tragedy he was unrivaled.

The above discussion of some of the principal actors during the last decade of the century may serve to indicate that the art had long since outgrown the amateur period and had become dignified and thoroughly effective. The companies being of the stock nature, there was not complete opportunity for division of labor, since the average player must be able to take a tragic or a comic part as well as to sing passably in the then popular ballad-operas. Of course an actor-of-all-work could not be a specialist in each department. But there were specialists, such as Jefferson and Cooper, and each player had his particular forte, which was respected so far as possible. Thus one actor made a feature of comic old men, another of serious fathers, a third of romantic heroes; one actress was excellent in old women, another in young girls, etc. Moreover the various rôles became in a manner the property of those actors who had shown their ability to handle them. This allowed special study, but it also had its disadvantage, for it was no uncommon thing to see an elderly man playing the youthful character assigned him years before, or a woman of distinct maturity and embon-point essaying the part of a coy damsel.

Plays were sometimes curiously miscast. When Miller's *Mahomet* was given at New York in 1795, the part of the father was taken by a new actor much younger than his children, Hodgkinson and Mrs. Melmoth. The former was five feet ten and corpulent; the latter was the largest and most matronly figure on the stage. Fennell, six feet six, played Romeo to the Juliet of Mrs. Marshall, who barely measured five feet. Twaits, five feet one, tried to play Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, much to the disgust of the critics.²¹

But on the whole the performances were well balanced. Each actor was retained because of his proved ability in one or

²¹ *New York Magazine*; or, *Literary Repository*, Jan., 1795; W. B. Wood, *Personal Recollections of the Stage*, Philadelphia, 1855, p. 96; Dunlap, p. 346.

several lines. The comparative evenness of the result may be gauged by the salaries, which ranged from about thirty to ten dollars a week. This scale contrasts sharply with that of the subsequent starring system, under which the company consisted of one or two highly-paid and very popular players and a dozen or so nonentities who worked for a pittance. Durang declares that at the close of the eighteenth century there were a half-dozen leading ladies in the Philadelphia theatre, while at the time in which he wrote (about 1854) there was only one. This large and well trained personnel produced a variety and quality of acting that caused the writer to look back on this period as a golden age in the American theatre.²²

The companies included not only the speaking performers, but also a few walking ladies and gentlemen, perhaps a pair of dancers for pantomimes or pauses in the program, and an acrobat to display his dexterity on the tight-rope or in some other edifying manner.

The programs presented by these versatile troupes always consisted of at least two parts: a drama and an afterpiece; and often several extra numbers were added. A typical bill of the more elaborate sort is the following:

1. A tragedy, *Bunker Hill*.
2. "The Song of the Hobbies."
3. A comic song.
4. A one-act piece, *New Hay at the Old Market*.
5. A eulogy of the New York Volunteers.
6. A Grand Pantomimical Ball, *The Siege of Quebec, or the Death of General Wolfe*.

The evening's entertainment began with the appearance of the orchestra from beneath the stage—in these later years composed of perhaps twenty respectable musicians, led by a conductor of some note. After two or three selections, a bell was rung by the prompter and up came the footlights. Another bell and the curtain ascended. As a rule the rising of the curtain at the opening of each act disclosed an empty stage, upon which certain of the characters immediately entered engaged in conversation. The end of an act was indicated, in some houses at least, by the lowering of an act-drop. But there is no reason to

²² *History of the Philadelphia Stage*, Chapters XVI and XXXV.

believe that a curtain was lowered at the shifts of scene within the act. When a change of setting was called for, the stage hands laid down grooves or tracks which met in the middle of the stage. On these, scenes composed of painted flats were pushed out in halves. If a change of the few properties used was necessary, or if a candle required snuffing, an attendant came on in full view of the audience and made the needed adjustments. The great majority of scenes ended with the withdrawal of all the actors so that the stage might be left clear for the shift. In those cases in which an exit was impossible, the flats were pushed out down-stage so as to cut off the actor from the spectators. Often the intervals between the acts were filled with songs or orchestral numbers. Seemingly there were no curtain calls, but as the play closed the actors acknowledged the audience by "polite bows."²³

There was an easy informality about the performances that is unknown to-day. The companies frequently gave as many as seventy dramas a season with about as many afterpieces. This prodigious total made it improbable that the actors would be letter-perfect. The prompter's voice was frequently heard in the land and apparently was accepted by the audience as a matter of course unless it tended to drown out the players. Cooper, with all his powers, was often a sorry offender in this regard, whether from a poor memory or from lack of study. On one occasion he completely forgot his lines in the most pathetic part of Dunlap's tragedy *André*, whereupon, according to the distressed author of the piece, the actor "after repeating 'Oh, André!—oh, André!' . . . approached the unfortunate André, who in vain waited for *his* cue, and falling in a burst of sorrow on his neck, cried, loud enough to be heard at the side scene, 'Oh, Andre!—damn the prompter!—Oh André! What's next, Hodgkinson,' and sunk in unutterable sorrow on the breast of his overwhelmed friend."²⁴ At another time as Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Cooper read the entire scene with Falstaff, placing the written part on the table at which they were seated. His misreadings of Shakespeare sometimes caused a titter through the audience.

²³ William Dunlap, *Memoirs of a Water Drinker*, New York, 1837, Vol. I, p. 76; Durang, Chapters XVIII and XIX; *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*; stage directions in American plays of the period.

²⁴ Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, p. 223.

It is said that a female singer never pretended to learn the words of a song, but wrote the first words of each line in the palm of her glove.²⁵

Informal also was the method of substituting in an emergency: When one actor was suddenly indisposed another went on and read the part from the open book, with what effect on the illusion one may well imagine. Apparently the understudy had not yet been invented.²⁶

An intimacy between actors and audience prevailed in those times impossible in our day of the picture-frame stage and the banished "aside." For this the construction of the interiors was partly responsible. In the Chestnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia (1794), of which we have an engraving, for instance, the stage projected beyond the curtain ten or fifteen feet and ran past the first section of boxes.²⁷ No doubt this part of the platform was much used by the players, and this of course would bring them into close contact with a portion of the spectators. Perhaps it was in a measure a result of this arrangement that the actors played more directly to the onlookers, not giving the latter reason to think they were overlooked. For example, when Hodgkinson made his first appearance in America he was greeted with loud applause, which he acknowledged by going to the footlights and making a very low bow, holding up the play the while.²⁸

Moreover the program was frequently interrupted by the interpolation of very personal features unannounced in the bills of the day. One evening in 1793 Hodgkinson arrived late. One or two hissed. The actor in a haughty manner demanded the reason and proceeded to tell a long tale of a drunkard who had insulted Mrs. Hodgkinson in the street, for which he had received a beating from the valiant husband.

Shortly thereafter Hodgkinson assumed a rôle that required the wearing of an English uniform. The French in the house hissed. Hodgkinson, always ready to make an address, explained that his part was that of a coward and bully. Immediately the English arose and threatened vengeance.

²⁵ Wood, p. 76.

²⁶ Dunlap, p. 95.

²⁷ See Sonneck opposite p. 113.

²⁸ Durang, Chapter XVII.

The ever-ready hiss was once directed at Mrs. Henry by a single man. She stopped the play, asked in what she had offended and left the stage; but her friends recalled her. There followed a spirited discussion in the papers as to whether or not an audience had the right to hiss.

Apparently the decision was in favor of the hissers, for when not long afterwards Vaughan came on the stage drunk, he was met with vigorous hisses. Clenching his fist, the Thespian cried: "Damn you, ye blackguards, I wish I had you here—I'd soon settle you."

But the most extraordinary passage-at-arms occurred in 1797. Mrs. Hallam had developed the lamentable habit of inebriety, which sometimes rendered her irresponsible when before the public. Consequently Hodgkinson, now one of the partners, forced her to withdraw from the theatre. But the Hallams, having resolved to reinstate her, one night scattered their supporters through the house, and when Hodgkinson came on he was astounded to hear a chorus of hisses. Mrs. Hallam then entered, dressed in black. Loud plaudits greeted her, while clubs were brandished at the speechless Hodgkinson. At this point Hallam, also dressed in black, stalked in and requested that his wife be given a hearing. She thereupon read a statement of her grievances and retired. Both men now tried to speak, but Hodgkinson prevailed. After silencing Hallam and quelling the rioters, he continued the play amid constant applause.²⁹ Such family quarrels on the stage are almost inconceivable to us, but seemingly our ancestors went to the theatre prepared to enjoy anything.

At times the play was interrupted by more corporeal missiles than hisses. In 1798 the New York manager advertised a reward of fifty dollars for information leading to the prosecution of those who for some nights past had made a practice of throwing at the orchestra and actors.³⁰

With such obstacles to meet, the art of the theatre might excusably have been somewhat ragged now and again.

²⁹ My authorities for the five above episodes are respectively: Dunlap, p. 107; *ibid.*, p. 111; Seilhamer, Vol. II, p. 334; *ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 3; Dunlap, p. 165.

³⁰ *Commercial Advertiser*, March 30, 1798.

On this early stage of ours Shakespeare held a much more distinguished place than he does to-day, and there is no reason to doubt that in general he was adequately presented. But some of the customs and devices then in vogue appear to us unusual and perhaps ineffective. For instance, *The Tempest*, given as adapted by Dryden, introduced a "grand Masque of Neptune and Amphitrite, drawn in a Shell Chariot by Sea Horses." (One would like to have seen the latter creatures.) A dance of foresters was advertised to occur in Act V of *As You Like It*; apparently these figures served much the same function as the chorus of modern comic-opera. The fifth act of *Romeo and Juliet* was amplified by an elaborately decorated funeral procession of Juliet to the tomb of the Capulets, accompanied by a solemn dirge. In *Henry VIII* stress was placed on "the Grand Coronation of Anne Bullen, with the mode and manner of delivering the usual challenge given by the Champion of England, on Horseback"—the challenge being an addition to Shakespeare. The horse on the small stage of the time must have seemed somewhat out of proportion.³¹

Other Shakespearean practices impress us as incongruous. The hero's triumphal entry in *Coriolanus* was attended by a chorus singing "See the Conquering Hero Comes." Shylock was sometimes acted by a comedian as a humorous part, and was provided with a shaggy red beard and an enormous hooked nose of wax. *Macbeth* was grotesquely mistreated. The witches were played by low comedians, who looked like old, tattered beggar women. Even ridiculous grimaces and gestures were added, which the critics were loud in condemning. These arbiters further objected that in the banquet scene, while Macbeth in a frenzy addressed the ghost of Banquo, the guests quietly and unconcernedly went on with the repast, munching apples, smirking and drinking healths. Another curious sight, more in keeping with Elizabethan methods than with our own, was witnessed in Act III when, according to the advertisements, "the little Spirit descends for, and ascends with Hecate, in a grand aerial car."³²

³¹ The four items of this paragraph are taken from *American Minerva*, New York, April 11, 1796; *ibid.*, Nov. 1, 1797; *ibid.*, Sept. 11, 1797; *Commercial Advertiser*, May 13, 1799.

³² References for these five points are as follows: *Commercial Advertiser*, June 3, 1799; Wood, p. 96; *New York Magazine*, Jan., 1795; *Commercial Advertiser*, Nov. 28, 1799; *ibid.*, Nov. 14, 1800.

In the costuming of Shakespeare's plays other incongruities resulted. Little attempt at appropriate or historically accurate dressing was made in the eighteenth century, even in England, and our theatres were still more careless. Before Cooper, Hamlet was equipped with neckcloth and wig like a contemporary gentleman. John Henry played Othello in the uniform of a British officer, with black face and woolly hair. Duncan in *Macbeth* wore kilt and plaid, with half boots and black breeches, looking, according to Washington Irving, "half king, half cobbler." Probably Macbeth himself followed Garrick's custom of dressing in gold-laced, scarlet breeches, gray coat and bob-wig, which established, so it was said, a close resemblance between the actor and "the Lord Mayor's coachman."³³

Such inappropriate costumes were not confined to Shakespeare. The usual dress of the actresses was of the hoop-skirt fashion of the period. So wide were the hoops of Mrs. Henry, who always arrayed herself at home and ceremoniously rolled up to the theatre in a crazy looking carriage, that her husband had to slide her out of the vehicle sidewise and carry her in his arms to the stage-door.³⁴ Undoubtedly the actresses in heroic parts imitated the convention of their British sisters of wearing conspicuous plumes of feathers in their hair. Sometimes there was a swing to classic garb, which was as blandly misused as any other. When Burk's *Female Patriotism* was brought out in 1798, Joan of Arc marched at the head of the French army "habited in the Grecian dress and armed *Cap à pe*, like the figure of Minerva."³⁵

Indeed the ill-dressing at the New York theatre during the closing years of the century was notorious. The allowance made by the manager for costumes was only fifteen dollars a week, and although the actors were required to furnish a part of their equipment, they naturally would economize on this item. A new play was not always provided with new dresses, but from the apparel on hand it might be fitted out in all varieties of period without regard to propriety. In 1802 Jonathan

³³ The four references are as follows: Dunlap, p. 61; *ibid.*, p. 81; *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*; Percy Fitzgerald, *A New History of the English Stage*, London, 1882, Vol. II, p. 135.

³⁴ Wood, p. 25.

³⁵ *Commercial Advertiser*, April 28, 1798.

Oldstyle asserted that "while one actor is strutting about the stage in the cuirass and helmet of Alexander, another, dressed up in gold-laced coat and bagwig, with a *chapeau de bras* under his arm, is taking snuff in a fashion of one or two centuries back, and perhaps a third figures in Suwarrow boots, in the true style of modern buckism."

Durang (Chapter XXXI) says that at this time the Philadelphia theatre possessed a large wardrobe, containing some fine silk dresses, and that it was capable of equipping any comedy in the English language. In addition the actors were given a small costume allowance. But though the dresses may have been rich, they were equally lacking in historical congruity.

The theatre-goers of those days, uneducated by musical comedies and Winter Gardens, took indignant exception to abbreviated female apparel. Mrs. Marshall was censured for wearing a dress which was "before midleg high and displeasing alike to males and females." To be sure, actresses sometimes played male parts, such as Fidele in *Cymbeline*, in distinctly and unbecomingly masculine attire, but a skirt that missed the floor was not to be tolerated. When Mrs. Byrne attempted to do some graceful dances at Philadelphia in a skirt unwieldy in length and bulk for a dancer but shorter than street dress, she met the most violent disapproval. After withdrawing for a few nights she reappeared with the addition of pantalettes tied at the ankle, but this apology failed to appease the prudes.³⁶

Perhaps the most significant advance of the post-Revolutionary stage was in the matter of scenery and effects. In the preceding epoch this department was still in its rudimentary state. But after the war the progress was continuous.

When the Old American Company reestablished itself after the conflict it began making a considerable feature of pantomimes, and since in these the element of acting was slight, the stress was put on machinery.

Spectacles and processions were also elaborately got up. In 1786 the John Street Theatre, New York, offered as a part of Lee's *Alexander the Great*, a "Triumphal entry of Alexander into Babylon, with a display of Armorial Trophies, Spoils, Ensigns,

³⁶ The two references are: Seilhamer, Vol. III, p. 191; Wood, p. 69.

the fleet of Spain, and a general engagement, in which the Algerines are totally defeated by fireships, bombs from the Fort, and blowing up their vessels.³⁹ As these examples indicate, marine scenery became very popular; "grand sea engagements" were repeated again and again.

That a considerable effort at pictorial accuracy was being made is clearly indicated by the announcement in 1789 of a pantomime, *Robinson Crusoe*, with new scenery and machinery, "the former (save a view of the *Falls of Passaick*) taken from Capt. Cook's Voyages to Otaheite, New Zealand, &c."⁴⁰

But these scenic attempts must have suffered from the smallness of the stages in America. The first stage of commodious proportions was that in the Chestnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia, erected in 1794. It was thirty-six feet wide and about seventy-one feet deep.⁴¹

The scene-painter for the new house was Charles Milbourne, an English artist of ability, who was brought over in 1792. He decorated the new stage in a manner far surpassing anything yet known in this country; contemporaries pronounced the result "both beautiful and sublime."⁴² The New York Theatre had obtained in 1793 Charles Ciceri, a scenic artist of experience in Paris and London. In large measure by the work of these two men, who appear to have been the first expert scene-painters America had possessed, from about 1794 scenery became more and more elaborate and rich.

Realism continued to be the general note of the decorations; the newspapers frequently announced scenery consisting of such views as Mount Vernon, the Arch Street Wharf at Philadelphia, the Boston State House, Beacon Hill, and even the launching of the Constitution with boats passing on the water.⁴³

The most complete description we have of eighteenth century stage mechanics has to do with Burk's *Bunker Hill*, given first at Boston in 1797 and afterwards presented at various cities. While the methods are cruder than the best employed

³⁹ *Daily Advertiser*, New York, May 5 and 10, 1788.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, June 26, 1789.

⁴¹ Durang, Chapter XIX.

⁴² Sonneck, p. 114.

⁴³ Seilhamer, Vol. III, p. 342; *American Minerva*, New York, May 21, 1796; Durang, Chapter XXIV.

at New York and Philadelphia, yet the explanation is unquestionably typical of many exhibitions. This complicated attempt at verisimilitude, which met the vociferous approval of thousands, was thus detailed by Burk in a letter to the John Street manager:

“The hill is raised gradually by boards extended from the stage to a bench. Three men should walk abreast on it, and the side where the English march up, should for the most part be turned toward the wings; on our hill there was room for eighteen or twenty men, and they were concealed by a board painted mud colour, and having two cannon painted on it—which board was three feet and a half high. The English marched in two divisions from one extremity of the stage, where they ranged, after coming from the wings, when they come to the foot of the hill. The Americans fire—the English fire—six or seven of your men should be taught to fall—the fire should be frequent for some minutes. The English retire to the front of the stage—second line of English advance from the wing near the hill—firing commences—they are again beaten back—windows on the stage should be open to let out the smoak. All the English make the attack and mount the hill. After a brisk fire, the Americans leave works and meet them. Here is room for effect, if the scuffle be nicely managed. Sometimes the English falling back, sometimes the Americans—two or three Englishmen rolling down the hill. A square piece about nine feet high and five wide, having some houses and a meeting-house painted on fire, with flame and smoak issuing from it, should be raised two feet distance from the horizon scene at the back of your stage, the windows and doors cut out for transparencies—in a word, it should have the appearance of a town on fire. We had painted smoak suspended—it is raised at the back wing, and is intended to represent Charlestown, and is on a line with the hill, and where it is lowest. The fire should be played skilfully behind this burning town, and the smoak to evaporate. When the curtain rises in the fifth, the appearance of the whole is good—Charlestown on fire, the breastwork of wood, the Americans appearing over the works and the muzzles of their guns, the English and the American music, the attack of the hill, the falling of the English troops, Warren’s half descending the hill and animating the Americans, the smoak and confusion, all

together produce an effect scarce credible. We had a scene of State-street—if you had one it would not be amiss—we used it instead of the scene of Boston Neck—it appears to me you need not be particular, but the hill and Charlestown on fire. We had English uniforms for men and officers. You can procure the coats of some company at New-York which dresses in red. Small cannon should be fired during the battle, which continued with us for twelve or fifteen minutes. I am thus prolix that you may find the less difficulty in getting it up—it is not expensive, and will always be a valuable stock piece. I should not wonder if every person in New-York, and some miles round it, should go to see it represented.”⁴⁴

In 1798* the Park Theatre in New York was opened to supplant the old and cramped John Street house. The new stage was large in comparison with others then known. The scenery was declared to exceed everything that had preceded it. The ample stage gave room for displays of a more extensive nature than had been possible hitherto. One of the early exhibitions prepared for the Park included a distant view of Belgrade, the burning of the camp, and a representation of the fortifications, on which an attack was made by storm with red hot balls. Another play of 1799 had a scene depicting the explosion of a volcano; and the evening’s bill, which numbered among its attractions the ascent of Harlequin amid a tremendous shower of fire, ended with a “Grand Display of Chinese fire-works.” Unusually ambitious was a spectacle of the same season in *The Shipwreck*: “Rocky Sea-Coast, on the English Channel—Sea in a violent Storm—A Ship appears tossing on the Waves, and is dash’d to pieces on the Rocks.”⁴⁵ A comparison of this description with the dark-stage naval scene in *The Conquest of Canada* convincingly reveals the advance the thirty-three intervening years had brought about.

Philadelphia was not outdone by her northern rival. In 1798 *Daranzel* called forth a “Grand Spectacle, Representing the battle of two Persian Armies—The storming of the King’s citadel—by the *Explosion* of a MINE—And the destruction of the whole PERSIAN FLEET, In the Bay of Ormus, by the

⁴⁴ Dunlap, p. 162.

⁴⁵ The three references are: *Commercial Advertiser*, Jan. 23, 1799; *ibid.*, May 15, 1799; *ibid.*, Feb. 18, 1799.

Cannon of the captured Fortress.”⁴⁶ Colman’s *Blue Beard* was seen in 1799. Durang (Chapter XXXI) says it was “produced in a style of scenic splendor and richness of costume never before equalled in this country, and, perhaps, with very few exceptions not surpassed since.”

One of the most remarkable achievements of our period (though it actually occurred on the ninth day of the new century) was the “grand heroic spectacle” of *The Siege of Oxydrace*, a Philadelphia venture. An antique battering ram was to be seen in full use. Alexander and his officers scaled the enemy walls by clambering over a bridge formed by the shields of their followers. Reaching the wall, they threw rope ladders over the coping of the turrets and jumped into the city, fighting at every step. Then Alexander appeared on a bridge at the back of the stage, battling against overwhelming numbers, receiving their darts in his shield and plucking them out. Real horses in full armor were an original feature, and eighty marines were borrowed from the Navy Yard to execute the troop movements.⁴⁷

We see, then, from the inception of the American stage a steady movement toward spectacular but realistic scenic effects, the motive of the producers apparently being to arouse the beholder’s wonder by the splendor and also the lifelikeness of the display. As important a development was this as any in our early theatre. It issued in some astonishing results in the first years of the nineteenth century, but it may be said to have reached its culmination in the first years of the twentieth.

The conclusion is indisputable that in the last decade of the eighteenth century the American theatre was far from being a primitive institution. Its stages were adequate, its scenery was elaborate and tasteful, its better actors were trained artists, some of whom must still be named among the most distinguished players of our country. If a modern theatre-goer detects certain absurdities and incongruities in the staging of this bygone era, he should not assume that a contemporary spectator would have been similarly impressed. Theatrical illusion is largely a matter of growing accustomed to the prevailing method—witness the Greek theatre and the Chinese. To our

⁴⁶ *Russell’s Commercial Gazette*, Philadelphia, April 12, 1798.

⁴⁷ Durang, Chapter XXXIV.

ancestors the methods and devices then in vogue were no doubt as satisfactory and convincing (barring interruptions and accidents) as those of to-day are to us. In the candle-lighted age as in the electric-lighted a sincerely and artistically acted drama would move its audience with sympathetic laughter or with pity and terror; and the admirers of the Hodgkinsons or of Cooper were no more disturbingly conscious of the artificial theatre about them than are the admirers of the Barrymores or of Mrs. Fiske.

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